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Iran-Iraq War Perils Stability Of Persian Gulf

The continuing crisis in Lebanon has diverted the attention of world leaders from an explosive situation a few hundred miles eastward: the still unsettled war between Iraq and Iran.

But U.S. intelligence sources tell me this conflict could go up in flames, with consequences more dangerous than the chaos in Lebanon. The conflict threatens the stability of the entire Persian Gulf region, on which the Western world depends for much of its oil.

Here's the story:

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, never known for moderation, appears to have been carried to new heights of unreasonableness by the military victory his army achieved over the Iraqi invaders.

Intelligence sources say Khomeini has made impossible demands on the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The only reasonable demand was for withdrawal from Iranian territory of all Iraqi troops, which the humiliated Hussein had already offered to do.

But Khomeini has also demanded staggering reparations from Iraq. The estimates run anywhere from \$20 billion to \$150 billion, obviously more than Iraq can hope to pay.

State Department experts believe Iraq's Arab neighbors may put up the reparations money rather than give Khomeini an excuse for carrying the war into Iraq itself.

The Persian Gulf sheiks are reportedly terrified by the threat that the Moslem fanaticism of Khomeini presents to their autocratic regimes.

But will this be enough to satisfy Khomeini? The State Department analysts are afraid not. For Khomeini's third major demand is apparently etched in stone: He is adamant in his insistence that Hussein be replaced.

The Iraqi dictator was obviously hurt politically by the failure of his half-baked military adventure. But the fact that he was not immediately overthrown is testimony to his staying power.

"Hussein is a survivor," an intelligence source told my associate Lucette Lagnado.

The big question is how far Khomeini will go to get revenge on Hussein.

Shiite Moslems, Khomeini's co-religionists, make up an overwhelming majority of the Iraqi population. The possibility of subversion is an

ever-present threat despite the traditional ethnic hostility between Arabs and Persians.

Even more ominous are the reports our intelligence analysts have been getting in recent weeks from Iran.

The reports suggest that there are factions in Iran that want to mount a military invasion to punish the Iraqis for the devastation they wrought in Iran.

Fortunately, there are countervailing forces urging restraint. These voices of relative moderation are mainly in the military; they point out that the Iranian army suffered heavy losses in the months of fighting, and needs time to reconstitute itself.

U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf, particularly the Saudis, have been lobbying earnestly for a Reagan administration "tilt" toward Iraq.

Hussein has been forsaken by his onetime supporters in the Kremlin, and badly needs military aid from somewhere to rebuild his shattered forces and keep control of his bewildered, restive population.

If Hussein falls, the Saudis argue, instability or even revolution could spread to the neighboring Arab states. The whole Persian Gulf could erupt.

And some of the intelligence analysts have concluded that sooner or later Hussein will indeed fall.